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ABSTRACT

This study examined challenges that Canadian educators faced when teaching aboriginal students in a large urban school. The study involved the school's principal, teachers, counselors, and coordinators of Aboriginal student programming. Participants, who were Aboriginal and Caucasian, completed semistructured interviews that examined personal information, challenges to teaching Aboriginal students, and suggestions for improvement. Data analysis indicated that challenges were directly influenced by students, parents, educators, and administrators. Most of the challenges were task-related rather than personal. Aboriginal and Caucasian respondents agreed on most of the challenges. Students' preparedness for school and inability to adapt to the school structure were challenges that were especially relevant. Participants agreed that Aboriginal students learned in unique ways which educators needed to understand and work with. Parental distrust of mainstream education was a significant challenge. Challenges related to educators and administrators were associated with lack of preparedness for diverse students, cultural conflict, and district disrespect for the school. Most of the strategies suggested by respondents treated symptoms of the challenges rather than the causes. Aboriginal and Caucasian educators developed their strategies differently. The paper makes recommendations for practice and for further research. An appendix provides the interview schedule. (Contains 33 references.) (SM)

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IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY EDUCATORS OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN AN URBAN SETTING

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Identifying and Addressing Challenges Encountered by Educators of Aboriginal Children in an Urban Setting

In a Canadian setting, Danyluk (1996) discovered that recent teacher graduates in central Alberta who taught Aboriginal children experienced higher degrees of job-related stress than more experienced teachers did. He believed that this finding was due, in part, to the presence of unique educational challenges that face educators of Aboriginal children—challenges that are not well addressed in teacher preparation and inservice programs. Danyluk further believed that as teachers gain more experience in working with Aboriginal students, they develop teaching strategies in the field to assist them in meeting the unique educational needs of these children.

Building on Danyluk's (1996) work, this interpretivistic, descriptive study exploring the challenges encountered by educators of urban Aboriginal children. These challenges, as well as strategies that educators evolved to address them, were identified through empirical data collection and then synthesized on the basis of a review of the literature and the primary author's experience.

Review of the Literature

Referring to multicultural education, Avery and Walker (1993) reported that "there is evidence that most teachers have limited knowledge about cultural and linguistic groups different from their own" (p. 27). From a cross-cultural perspective, McAlpine and Crago (1995) asserted that

> if teachers come from cultures . . . [that] are very different from those of their students and the teachers do not modify their interactions, children will find it more difficult to participate in classroom structures and succeed. Similarly, teachers will find it harder to feel and be successful because students are not participating in ways that they expect. In other words, if the culture is not the same, the presumption of shared identity soon

breaks down and unless new beliefs about the students emerge, teachers may end up blaming the students for not learning. (p. 404)

In addition, Sikkema and Niyekawa (1987) acknowledged that "cues that help us function effectively in our own culture may be misleading in a cross-cultural situation" (p. 6). Therefore, "until we learn the cues of the other culture, we find ourselves in an unstructured situation, not knowing what to do or what to expect" (p. 6).

Characteristics of Educators of Aboriginal Children

Consistent with the literature (e.g., Alberta Education, 1987; Atleo, 1991; Corson, 1991; McAlpine & Crago, 1995; Rosin, 1993; Wilson, 1991), challenges encountered by educators of Aboriginal students are directly influenced by both educators and students. As Avery and Walker (1993), Brownell and Smith (1993), Carr and Klassen (1997), and Corson (1991) found, non-Native educators are affected by doctrines of the mainstream or majority culture. Aboriginal educators, through their teacher education training as well as through involvement with mainstream education systems, boards, departments of education, and so on, are also influenced by the precepts of the mainstream or majority culture (e.g., Vold, 1989).

Aboriginal Culture and History

The literature (e.g., Estrin & Nelson-Barber, 1995; Heinrich, Corbine, & Thomas, 1990; Pepper & Henry, 1986; Whyte, 1986) revealed that culture directly influences both Aboriginal students and their parents or guardians. Referring to present educational trends, Estrin and Nelson-Barber claimed that the "educational strategies of the elders which emphasized cooperation and reflection are remarkably similar to those promoted in current education reform agendas" (p.1). Therefore, one may assume that Aboriginal students are experiencing greater success in the education system today. However, according to Estrin and Nelson-Barber, "the opposite is true" (p. 1). Instead, they maintained that there exists a

definite contrast and conflict in expectations between the home and school life of Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal Learning Preferences

According to Browne (1990), Irvine and York (1995), More (1993), Pepper and Henry (1986), and Wilgosh and Mulcahy (1993), there are unique ways in which Aboriginal children learn. Irvine and York wrote that Aboriginal children

1. Prefer visual, spatial, and perceptual information rather than verbal;...
2. use mental images to remember and understand words and concepts rather than word associations;
3. watch and then do rather than employ trial and error;
4. have well-formed spatial ability;
5. learn best from nonverbal mechanisms rather than verbal;
6. learn experientially and in natural settings;
7. have a generalist orientation, interested in people and things;
8. value conciseness of speech, slightly varied intonation, and limited vocal range;
9. prefer small-group work;
10. favor holistic presentations and visual representations. (pp. 490-491)

The literature revealed that there are preferred teaching approaches that align with the learning preferences of Aboriginal children (Atleo, 1991; Estrin & Nelson-Barber, 1995; Heit, 1993; Irvine & York, 1995; McAlpine & Crago, 1995; Pepper & Henry, 1986; Turner-Laliberte, 1993; Whyte, 1986). Whyte identified six teaching strategies that prove successful with Aboriginal children. He summarized these strategies as follows:

1. [The teacher should encourage] an open classroom environment as opposed to a more structured traditional classroom setting....

2. The teacher should act as an equal to his or her student, rather than as a supreme authority.

3. Formal lecturing to the class as a whole should be kept to a minimum. Conversations which are highly structured and centered around the teacher; initiated dialogue should be kept to a minimum.

4. There is a need for more pupil-centered teaching practices which encourage student initiative and responsibility for learning.

5. The teacher should interact with the children in small groups so that the individual children are not placed in a competitive situation in front of the whole class. The situation where a child is singled out from a large group and asked to reply verbally to questions or perform other tasks should be definitely avoided.

6. Teachers should not ask the child to demonstrate knowledge or skill in the essence of others until the student has acquired an acceptable recognized level of competence. (pp. 16-17)

Significance of the Study

In Canada, by constitutional right, schooling is made available to all children on equal terms. As educators work with students of various cultural backgrounds—for example, Aboriginal students—there are obvious as well as subtle differences in learning styles, cultural customs, and values that do not always synchronize with the expectations of teachers. This has confirmed the need for educators to adopt a multicultural approach to all aspects of education. This notion was supported by Johnson and Ramirez (1990), who remarked that teachers must "understand and consider the special circumstances of distinct cultural groups in society in order to provide culturally diverse children with more appropriate educational services" (p. vii). Corson (1991) observed that

> teachers who are not members of the local social network, who travel into the community each day and draw their conclusions about it from the filtered impressions that they receive from their students and from the caricatured descriptions that often

circulate in the staffrooms of schools, may be highly biased in their assessments of the school's sociocultural context. (p. 10)

In further reference to teachers of Aboriginal children, McAlpine and Crago (1995) maintained that, as a "result of their training, teachers often assume a particular cultural stance with regard to the classroom interactions that they engage in" (p. 404). Furthermore, "the Aboriginal children whom they teach frequently come from cultural backgrounds that are quite dissimilar from these educators" (p. 404). With this in mind, Wilson (1994) argued that it is necessary for teachers to develop an understanding of the culture of Aboriginal children in order to "sensitize themselves into giving effective caring instruction, and to fit their knowledge into the value system of their students" (p. 314).

Moreover, Wilson (1991) said that "the lack of understanding of cultural conflict on the part of school personnel contributes to student failure" (p. 379). Similarly, Johnson and Ramirez (1990) wrote that "there are students who continuously meet with academic failure because of incompatibilities between the way they learn and the way teachers teach" (p. 9).

Lack of Research

According to Ramsey (1989), there are "relatively few studies . . . which examine specific teaching skills and styles that are related to the success or failure of children from different ethnic backgrounds" (p. 53). She further stated that a major intent of multicultural education is "to ensure that all children are taught in ways that are most effective, and that respect is built on their cultural styles and experiences" (p. 53). The purpose of the present research was to begin to address this gap.

Method and Data Source

This study relied exclusively on qualitative research methods. The respondent group consisted of educators associated with a school from a large urban school system situated in a major city in Alberta. The school served a homogenous population of just under 150

Aboriginal pupils, ranging from Grades 5 to 9. The school employs 16 professional staff, comprising 9 teachers, 2 student counsellors, 3 coordinators of Aboriginal programming, and 2 administrators.

Data were collected through the use of semistructured interviews (see Appendix A), varying in length from 60 to 90 minutes, with 14 educators. The sample comprised the following school staff members: five teachers, two student counsellors, two coordinators of Aboriginal programming, and the assistant principal. In addition, four other respondents were interviewed, namely: (a) an educator who had recently served the school for 13 years as a teacher and administrator, (b) the district's Native Education Consultant, and (c) two educators who had recently served the school.

Of the 14 participants, 7 were female and 7 were male. As well, eight of the participants were of Aboriginal descent and six were Caucasian. Of the Aboriginal participants, five were female, and three were male. Two of the Caucasian participants were female, and four were male.

Data Analysis

Interview responses were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. These interview data were qualitatively analyzed both deductively and inductively. This was accomplished by open coding the interview responses and subjecting them to thematic analysis procedures as described by Berg (1998).

Responses were then segregated into distinct segments, and similarities and differences were identified. Categories were developed as themes and patterns emerged. The interview responses were then reconstructed, which allowed for exploration of relationships among categories.

Limitations

The educators who took part in this study were not necessarily representative of all educators who serve Aboriginal children.

The findings of this study were limited by the selected research methodology. The sole data-gathering technique was semistructured interviews. Other information-gathering strategies were not included, therefore limiting the variety of data obtained. Moreover, the validity of the data collected from the participants was limited by the extent to which the interview questions addressed the research questions.

Results

Data were collected around the issues of the challenges and opportunities encountered by educators of Aboriginal children in an urban setting; as well as the strategies evolved to address them. The resultant findings (see Figure 1) provided further understanding of urban Aboriginal education.

An important finding was the direct reference to the context of the setting of the school. Because an urban school that served a homogenous population of Aboriginal students was chosen for the study, one cannot ignore the context in which the study took place. This could be substantiated, however, only through further research, including replication of the study. Nevertheless, the implication is that the setting is crucial and thereby influenced the findings.

The findings are delineated in terms of (a) students, (b) parents, (c) educators, and (d) administration.

Students

The major student challenges identified were (a) student learning preferences, (b) low or inconsistent student attendance, (c) student preparedness for school, (d) inability of students to adapt to a structured educational environment, (e) student behaviors, and (f) low student

Figure 1. Summary of challenges and strategies in educating urban Aboriginal children.

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respect for education. The principal strategies evolved by educators to address these challenges were (a) building relationships, (b) establishing and maintaining high expectations, (c) being flexible, (d) adapting both curriculum and instruction, and (e) modelling—which addressed both social skills and issues of student racism.

Consistent with the literature (e.g., Browne, 1990; Irvine & York, 1995; More, 1993; Pepper & Henry, 1986; Wilgosh & Mulcahy, 1993), the vast majority of the participants claimed that Aboriginal students learn in ways different from the mainstream culture. However, one participant was hesitant to agree. He argued that the notion of a distinct Aboriginal learning style is "really a contentious issue" because of factors such as mixed racial marriages between Aboriginal and non-Native people. This concern paralleled, in many ways, the positions advanced by researchers such as Johnson and Ramirez (1990), Kleinfeld (1975, 1979), Kleinfeld and Nelson (1991), Larose (1991), Pepper and Henry (1986), and Sawyer (1991).

On the other hand, this participant was quick to acknowledge that test data collected throughout the school district were congruous with the literature supporting the existence of an Aboriginal learning style. This was consistent with information related by the Manager of Division Monitoring of Edmonton Catholic Schools (personal correspondence, September 1997), who corroborated the literature, stressing that, for the most part, Aboriginal students in that district achieved higher scores than non-Native students did on the nonverbal components of the 1997 Canadian Test of Basic Skills.

Parents

The findings pointed to a direct connection between parents and students, and subsequently between students and the challenges identified. The findings revealed that parental influence on students, and therefore the challenges encountered, involved such circumstances as (a) poverty, (b) inadequate parenting skills, and (c) parental distrust of mainstream education, which had a direct effect on students. The findings emphasize the need

for further research to determine whether or not the parental challenges identified are indeed unique to Aboriginal education or whether they are characteristic of factors such as socioeconomic status.

The main strategies evolved by educators to address these challenges were relationship building between parents and educators, and holding parents accountable for educational issues pertaining to their children.

Educators

The major educator challenges identified were (a) educator cultural conflict, (b) high degrees of job-related stress, and (c) lack of cohesiveness among staff. The main strategies evolved to address these challenges emerged as (a) increasing educator awareness of Aboriginal culture, and (b) proactively maintaining staff wellness.

Further, the participants identified eight strategies they used to best meet the needs of their students, namely (a) providing a highly structured learning environment, (b) earning trust, (c) practising patience, (d) using democracy in student relations, (e) developing friendships with students, (f) devoting extra time to their position, (g) humor, and (h) rewarding students.

Some participants discussed immersing themselves in Aboriginal culture to gain insight. Others believed that participation in workshops, inservices, and programs that emphasized Aboriginal issues was an effective method of enlightenment.

Administration

The participants identified the major challenges associated with administration as (a) the school's mandate, (b) the practice of segregating Aboriginal students, (c) basic skill acquisition, and (d) overall disrespect for the school as demonstrated by the district.

The findings revealed that the principal strategies that evolved included adjustments to the programming, timetable, and overall mandate of the school. In addition, fundraising was

identified as a strategy that evolved to address perceived deficiencies to the allotted resources, both material and financial.

Conclusions

The following section describes the conclusions reached in the study. The conclusions are presented in three subsections focussing on: (a) the challenges encountered by educators in an urban Aboriginal school, (b) strategies educators use to address the challenges identified, and (c) how these strategies evolved.

What Are the Challenges?

The research indicated that challenges encountered by educators of Aboriginal students are directly influenced by students, their parents, educators, and administrators. The overall conclusion of this research is that there are unique challenges encountered by educators in an urban Aboriginal school. Moreover, most of the challenges described by the participants were task related rather than personal in nature. With few exceptions, both the Aboriginal and Caucasian participants appeared to agree on the challenges identified.

The findings indicate that students' preparedness for school and inability to adapt to the structure of school were challenges that appear to be relevant to urban Aboriginal education.

The participants overwhelmingly supported the literature (e.g., Browne, 1990; Irvine & York, 1995; More, 1993; Wilgosh & Mulcahy, 1993) claiming that Aboriginal students learn in unique ways. Educators should therefore be cognizant of these aspects and align their pedagogical efforts to serve the educational needs of these children effectively.

As well, unique challenges related to the parents of urban Aboriginal students were discussed. Consistent with the assertions of Ogbu (1993), parental distrust of mainstream education was the most pronounced of the parental challenges discussed. The vicious circle of despair experienced by many Aboriginal parents, although not unique to urban settings, nonetheless was identified as a challenge unique to Aboriginal education.

Issues such as student attendance and behavior, although highlighted as challenges, were not necessarily unique to urban Aboriginal education. Instead, perhaps they were more attributable to factors relating to the inner city—the milieu of the overwhelming majority of the urban Aboriginal students in this study.

Many of the challenges pertaining to educators and administrators were highly relevant to urban Aboriginal education. Among the most accentuated were challenges associated with the lack of preparedness of educators, cultural conflict of educators, and district disrespect for the school. Many of the challenges associated with educators are far from surprising in that, of the six Caucasian educators interviewed, only two had any teacher training in Aboriginal or intercultural education.

Perhaps the most contentious issue raised by the participants was the perceived district practice of using the school as a "dumping ground" for staff and for Aboriginal students who were not successful in other district schools. The vast majority of the participants not only identified this as a challenge, but also voiced their discomfort with the philosophical underpinnings associated with this practice.

From our experiences with schools in other settings, it was clear that several of the educator and administrator challenges were not exclusive to urban Aboriginal education; for example, job-related stress and staff cohesiveness.

What Strategies Do Educators Use?

The majority of the strategies put forth by the participants appeared to be used to treat symptoms of the aforementioned challenges, not the root causes. The participants, both Aboriginal and Caucasian, consistently identified relationships, high expectations, and flexibility as predominant themes throughout the discussion of strategies used with students. The participants were also in agreement in identifying strategies to address curriculum and instruction, social-skills enhancement, and antiracism. Success with urban Aboriginal students seemed dependent on whether or not these strategies were used.

Typically, the strategies suggested to address parental challenges were similar to those discussed for students (e.g., relationship building and accountability). Understandably, discussion on this topic by educators who were not in either an administrative or a counselling role was rather limited due to the nature of the teachers' roles.

How Did These Strategies Evolve?

For the most part, discussion on the evolution of the strategies was specific to urban Aboriginal education. More specifically, the majority of the discussion centered on the evolution of strategies to address the pedagogical, cultural, and spiritual needs of urban Aboriginal children.

There were definite contrasts between Aboriginal and Caucasian educators with respect to the evolution of strategies. Generally, the Aboriginal educators had more formal and informal training in Aboriginal educational issues than did their Caucasian colleagues. Moreover, the principal means of enlightenment reported by Aboriginal participants were teachings by Elders and their grandparents. Although some Caucasian participants attributed the evolution of their strategies to the teachings of the Elders, most indicated that their strategies evolved through experience on the job, experimentation, observation, corroboration with other educators, and their education.

The strategies evolved addressed both the holistic and the pedagogical needs of urban Aboriginal children. However, the data revealed that most of the strategies to address holistic needs were evolved by the Aboriginal educators, whereas most of the pedagogical strategies were evolved by the Caucasian educators. This is to be expected, in that of the eight Aboriginal educators interviewed, five served in nonclassroom capacities in which they were responsible for the holistic needs of the students, whereas five of the six Caucasian participants had classroom assignments.

Each year the district provides several Aboriginal-focused workshops, inservices, and retreats. Interestingly, although some participants referred to these professional-development

efforts as a means of evolving their strategies, there was not as much emphasis on these sources as was expected. Instead, the participants, both Aboriginal and Caucasian, credited other modes as having more impact on their evolution of strategies.

Recommendations

The findings and conclusions of this study lead to several recommendations for both practice and future research.

Recommendations for Practice

It is recommended that school districts afford school administrators autonomy in selecting staff. The practice of "dumping" personnel into schools that require specialized teacher training is, to say the least, counterproductive. With regard to the school described in this study, only staff who were trained and had a strong desire to serve the unique educational needs of urban Aboriginal students should have been assigned to the school.

It is recommended that school districts serving Aboriginal students ensure that inservice and workshop opportunities in Aboriginal education issues are provided to their staffs. Ideally, these opportunities would be offered at the commencement of the school year and would be tailored to the issues facing each school. The findings of this study indicated that the participants gained the majority of their Aboriginal cultural awareness from the experience gained at the school, not from formal inservices. However, this was not the case with pedagogical issues. Therefore, professional development programs should be designed around specific objectives that concentrate on pedagogical areas, especially those related to Aboriginal learning preferences.

It is recommended that school personnel make concerted efforts to establish relationships with the parents of Aboriginal students. Perhaps this could be facilitated through expanding the school's mandate to include programs that further encourage connections between the school and community.

It is recommended that parent programs be established to address parenting-skills concerns. A theme that permeated throughout the interviews was that of concerns with parents. In order to address the "root" of this issue, governments should facilitate programs that cater to Aboriginal families. Programs such as family intervention, parenting skills, addictions counselling, and cultural healing were recommended by the participants. Moreover, it is recommended that these programs be conducted by specialists (i.e., psychologists, social workers, Elders, cultural facilitators) who are not only highly trained in providing these programs, but also especially aware of Aboriginal matters.

It is recommended that school districts closely examine and monitor the mandates of schools of choice. This recommendation is based on the findings of the study described in this paper, which reveal that over the past several years the original mandate for the school, which was based on an altruistic foundation with the intent to provide an educational setting for urban Aboriginal students that celebrated Aboriginal culture and diversity, had in fact regressed to become a convenient "dumping ground" for Aboriginal students who were not successful in other district schools. To be truly effective, this initiative must involve *all* stakeholders in the process.

Recommendations for Further Research

It is recommended that the research be replicated with an expansion of the research design to allow for comparison between band-operated schools located in rural settings and urban, publicly funded schools serving only Aboriginal students. For the most part, the literature did not differentiate Aboriginal issues in the context of urban versus rural. Therefore, the inferences drawn from the literature are general in nature. Replication would allow for further insight into what role demographic setting plays in Aboriginal education. As well, this type of investigation would further assist in casting light on the *inner-city* dimension.

It is recommended that the study described in this paper be replicated with more consideration given to the differences between Aboriginal and Caucasian educators. According

to Stairs (1995), "The roles of a Native and a non-Native educator in ostensibly the same position, even in the same school, differ in multiple ways" (p. 147). This research, although it highlighted and reported differences between the two races, did not specifically focus on this factor.

It is recommended that the study described be replicated with consideration given to the differences in the roles of the educators. The study described involved educators who served the school in various capacities. The findings were not delineated based on the participants' roles. Instead, the findings were analyzed and reported concentrating on what was said, not on who provided the data. Replication of the study with an emphasis on examining perceptual differences based on educator position would prove enlightening.

It is recommended that further research be conducted to examine the ethical, altruistic, and fiscal consequences of segregating Aboriginal students from mainstream students. The participants had mixed perceptions on this practice. Further research would provide additional insight.

Concluding Comments

As we move toward the next millennium, one of the most pressing issues that faces Canada's education system is how to fulfil the responsibility of providing appropriate educational experiences to Aboriginal students. This research was an attempt to contribute to this pursuit.

The intention in this study was to test the theory that there are unique challenges encountered by educators of urban Aboriginal students. In addition, educators have had to evolve strategies to address these challenges. Several of the outcomes of this research substantiate this theory. However, one is led to ponder the question, are the challenges described unique to urban Aboriginal education, or are they more indicative of the issues which face inner-city education, of which urban Aboriginal education is only a segment.

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Personal Information

1. In what year did you earn your teacher education degree(s)?
2. Where did you take your teacher training?
3. What was your route of study at university or teacher college?
4. How many years of education do you have for salary purposes?
5. What other educational experiences have you participated in?
6. How many years have you been at this school?
7. How many years have you been with this district?
8. Have you taught elsewhere in this district? If so, what schools and/or assignments have you had?
9. Do you have teaching experience in any other districts? If so, what were they?
10. Please describe your current assignment?

Challenges/Opportunities Encountered Teaching in an Urban Aboriginal School/ Strategies Used to Address the Challenges

11. As a(n) _____ in this school, can you identify four or five (educational and personal) challenges/opportunities you face in the classroom (school)?
12. What strategies do you use to address these challenges?
13. How did you evolve these strategies?
14. What strategies have you attempted to use which **did not** seem to be effective? Why do you feel that this was so?
15. As you reflect on the time that you have been at this school, in your present position, how have your reactions to these challenges changed over time?

Participant Suggestions for Improving Aboriginal Education

16. What do you need to become more successful at meeting the needs of Aboriginal children?

17. My study is about identifying and addressing the perceived challenges experienced by educators of Aboriginal children attending an urban school. With this in mind, what recommendations do you have which may or may not have been touched upon in this interview?